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## THE SPANISH TEACHER'S RESPONSIBILITY

(Delivered at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish, December 30, 1920, Chicago.)

I shall take, in a manner, for my text two prophecies, uttered at about the same time, rather more than a decade ago, by two American scholars of repute. One of them I have already quoted in print. It was made in an address by Professor Raymond Weeks before the Modern Language Section of the Illinois State Teachers' Association, in the Fall of 1908. It was, in substance, this:

"I will venture to predict that twenty-five years from now modern languages studied in this section of the country (the Middle West) will rank in numerical strength of enrollment as follows: Spanish, French, German."

This seemed incredible at that time, when German was first, French a bad second, and Spanish a much worse third. It has probably come to pass this year, although I have not seen the figures.

The other prophecy was made by the President of an Eastern university in the spring of 1910, and was to the effect that, in his opinion, ten years would see a renaissance of interest in the study of Greek and an extension of college requirements in that subject for the A. B. degree. I need not tell you whether or not this prophecy has been fulfilled. Earlier than that, by several years, when I was about to turn away discouraged from my attempt to earn a living by teaching my first love, which was Latin, I was assured by academic mentors whom I loved and trusted, that the pendulum of popular favor, which had then been for a generation swinging slowly away from the classics, would start, indeed had started to swing back again, and that all that was necessary was to keep the faith a very little time longer. I kept it for only two years. It seemed to me even then that those kindly, scholarly gentlemen were mistaken or self-deceived. The pendulum *might*, to be sure, swing back toward Plato and Ovid once again, but I doubted that it would be in my lifetime.

All of us who believe in the education of the man or the woman for the sake of manhood or womanhood, and not merely for the sake of what they can be made to turn out in material products, will regret that this should be so.

Among college teachers whose experience covers a long term of years one meets with, at times, the complaint that fine, and even sound, scholarship is going out of fashion ; that students come up from the secondary schools more and more poorly prepared every year. If this be true, and my own experience, while not supplying evidence conclusive enough to establish the point, still does not tend to disprove it, the lamentable circumstance is doubtless due in part to the fact that, with the numbers attending college enormously increased over those of twenty years ago, college students no longer represent the select few of unusual mental equipment, ambition and determination of character. *More* even, I believe, is it attributable to the systematic removal of difficulties from the student's path ; not merely the stupid difficulties due to a blundering manner of approach, but those inherent in the nature of the task itself, the overcoming of which strengthens the moral as well as the mental fiber.

For some time past, certainly for twenty years, education has been developing along a line which is directly the opposite of that universal law which gives a premium to the overcoming of difficulty. The tendency has been to make the processes of education more and more easy, and to do this not only as an expedient but as a philosophy.

"Study the nature and the special characteristics of the individual mind and work in accordance therewith. Follow the lines of least resistance. In the kindergarten, blend work with play so that the child will not be conscious of any effort. Continue this method upward. Let the teacher go in advance of all work and do all the thinking and let the pupil acquiesce. Let him have keys to his problems and translations to his languages. Let him follow the bent of his mind and choose the studies which are easy to him ('snap subjects' is the familiar phrase)."

The outcome of this method is very flattering, and very deceptive, until one gets out from this highly artificial condition of things into the regions where the laws of the universe have their way once more, and then, face to face with the realities, which bristle with difficulties, and with no teacher to solve them for him, the youth finds that he has no training and no experience with which to encounter difficulties for himself, and he either drops to a position unworthy of him or begins all over again to learn the real secret, not only of education but of life, that to succeed is to conquer one's own difficulties.

Some of the aversion which students show to studying Latin and Greek is unquestionably due to their well-founded belief that these are difficult subjects rather than that they are useless subjects. Some of our well-meant efforts to make our own subject interesting have been, I fear, unconsciously directed toward eliminating or disguising the difficulties which inevitably inhere in it. A case in point is the improper conception of the Direct Method, that conception which eliminates the element of preparation. To be obliged to "get one's lesson" sounds very old-fashioned in certain circles, but the process creates and nourishes intellectual fiber. A certain moral discipline blends with the intellectual in the work of preparation for the class. The demoralizing influence of a condition in which one feels that he can do as he likes, as regards preparation, is insidious and far reaching.

Let me be clear, if possible, on the matter of interest. The absolutely hopeless teacher is the dull teacher, the teacher who dwells interminably upon the "subjunctive of characteristic." To inspire interest is the *sine qua non*. Let him turn his recitation into a vaudeville by all means, if that is the only method that occurs to him of preventing his class from going to sleep. But it certainly is not the case that the presence of difficulty destroys interest. Rather a legitimate and necessary difficulty honestly met and overcome stimulates the finest and most vivid type of interest that we know.

I like to think that it is in the hands of us teachers of Spanish to do something to make up for the loss which the abandonment of Greek has caused in our school and college life. It is not, after all, the Greek itself that is being missed, but that which Greek stands for, and of which it is perhaps in all history the finest embodiment and expression. What is lacking, what even those who have been responsible for the over-emphasis upon a purely materialistic attitude toward science and learning, themselves, perhaps unconsciously, miss, is more high and fine thinking, more imagination, more humanity, more spirituality, in a word, more culture in the teaching and life of our institutions of learning.

Herein, it seems to me, lies our opportunity and our responsibility. If it is true that the classics are going out, it is equally true that the modern languages, or at least two of them—Spanish and French—are coming in to take the place in the curriculum which the older humanities have vacated. It devolves upon us, then, who teach the languages, to make our subject really fill that place. The

*Iliad* is the greatest of the epics, but the *Poem of the Cid* is a splendid epic, too. Juvenal had no keener eye for the failings and weaknesses of mankind than had the Archpriest of Hita; Cicero's knowledge of the human soul was not broader nor deeper than Cervantes'. In other words, the materials are ready to our hand; it remains for us to make them ours and to use them worthily.

The study of Spanish, like that of Greek or of any language, divides itself into two parts—not, however, altogether mutually exclusive—disciplinary, that one having to do with the mind, and cultural, that which has to do with the soul. The first two years of the student's acquaintance with the subject must perforce be largely disciplinary, under this definition, but need not, and should not, be entirely so. The limitations imposed by the medium of a foreign idiom prevent him from wandering at will through the pleasant places of Spanish literature. But he should have frequent glimpses of the promised land through the eyes of his teacher.

"Life is short and art is long." Many of us have been forced by circumstances to begin to teach Spanish before we were ready. But that has not been our fault. Blame will attach to us only if we remain unready. If I allow myself an illustration drawn from our daily professional life, do not, I beg of you, press the conclusion beyond the limits intended. A Spanish teacher who is entirely unpossessed of that really vast background of acquaintance with the literature and culture of Spain which is necessary to make the subject live and minister somewhat to the souls of his pupils does not read a half-dozen Spanish books a year outside of text-books, and defends himself, sincerely enough, against the charge of laziness by saying, "I have neither the time nor the strength. I teach five classes a day and correct papers three hours every night." On this basis, that teacher will be no more worthy of his high calling ten years hence than he is now, beyond a certain increased efficiency of mechanical technique. Let him correct papers one night a week and read Cervantes and Lope de Vega the other four. It is only when a teacher supplements his formal training by the persistent, steady, day-by-day acquirement of new facts and new ideas that he is by way of placing himself in a position to do his duty by his students and his subject.

Every good Spanish teacher whom I have known was an enthusiast. It is one of the really fine compensations of the profession. To the enthusiast, his own specialty is *the* subject *par excellence*

that should be taught and studied. This is a natural, wholesome, and proper frame of mind. But one should not let this enthusiasm destroy his critical attitude toward his own subject. Not everything Spanish is equally good and great. In combating the time-worn myth of the superiority of French to Spanish (it would be as intelligent to argue the superiority of chemistry to physics), it does not advance the cause to say that Corneille is only a plagiarist of Spanish sources, that every line Cervantes wrote was immortal, or that the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is the greatest novel of the twentieth century. It is more effective, because it is true, to say that the French drama of the seventeenth century owed its inspiration to Spain, that Cervantes was the greatest novelist that ever lived, and that Blasco Ibáñez wrote a good war story at the psychological moment. Let us by all means keep and continue to exercise our faculty of critical judgment, our sense of proportion and our just appreciation of values, literary and otherwise.

At the same time that we defend our subject warmly against attacks inspired by selfish interest, jealousy, or mere ignorance, let us guard against falling into the error of bad taste implied in following the example of those who attack us. We may for the most part, I think, acquit ourselves of the charge of having sought to advance our cause by unfairly depreciating that of another language. It is to be hoped that we shall continue to maintain this attitude. There is no reason for other feeling among teachers of the several languages than a friendly and generous rivalry, based neither upon slander nor upon cheap expedients for creating an ephemeral popularity, but upon the solid elements of value which inhere in a great language and a great literature, and which it is our duty as well as our greatest satisfaction to develop to their fullest plenitude of service.

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